



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement in Response to Ambassador Eberhard Heyken, Head of OSCE Office in Minsk

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Paul W. Jones
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 7, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomes Ambassador Heyken to this meeting of the Permanent Council.

As this will be his final appearance before this body, I would like to express the high regard the United States holds for Ambassador Heyken and our appreciation for his outstanding service as head of the OSCE Office in Minsk.

Despite difficult operating conditions, Ambassador Heyken never tired in his efforts to reach out to the Belarusian Government and to civil society; to promote projects that would improve the lives of Belarusians; and to raise awareness of the OSCE and its principles.

The United States commends Ambassador Heyken for his reliable monitoring of protests, political trials and the status of political prisoners, including through visiting them in jail and informing the PC on their health conditions.

The United States appreciates the efforts of the OSCE Office in Minsk during this reporting period to facilitate contact between Belarusian authorities and OSCE officials, including Freedom of the Media Representative Haraszti, Special Trafficking Representative Konrad and Economic and Environmental Coordinator Swiecicki.

We also support the Office's efforts, in conjunction with other OSCE elements, to share best practices from across the region with Belarusian authorities as they considered various legislative issues.

During Ambassador Heyken's tenure, the United States would have hoped that more could have been achieved to promote stronger OSCE-Belarusian cooperation and a healthy government-civil society relationship in Belarus. These are goals that are fully within the mandate of the OSCE Office in Minsk.

The fact that this has not occurred lies clearly and wholly with the Belarusian Government. The latest evidence of this is Belarus' refusal to accept OSCE offers of assistance as it formulated and passed in June two new laws on public associations and political parties. We are disturbed by initial reports that these laws have only further increased the already unreasonable legal requirements imposed on civil society and further enhanced the punitive tools available to the Government.

The United States shares Ambassador Heyken's disappointment with the steadily worsening conditions for civil society in Belarus and Belarusian foot-dragging with regard to project activities.

The Ambassador's report provides clear examples of how Belarus could quickly show good faith in cooperating with the OSCE and in taking at least initial steps to live up to its human dimension commitments.

First, the United States urges Belarus to negotiate with the OSCE Office in Minsk a revamped project approval and registration process that would facilitate, rather than hinder, the Office's activities.

Second, the United States calls on Belarus to consider, in good faith, projects that involve NGOs, including as the OSCE's main partner. With regard to the project on organizing training for social service centers so that they can better tackle domestic violence, we fear that Ambassador Heyken's concern is accurate that Belarus refuses to proceed because it was proposed, and would be implemented, by an NGO. Refusal to move expeditiously on this project should be truly shocking to all delegations.

Similarly, Belarus should move forward with the NGO-proposed project to develop legal services for public associations. Its refusal to do so demonstrates that Belarusian authorities have devised the country's legal framework to serve as a tool to suppress independent media, NGOs and political parties.

Third, the United States calls on Belarus to negotiate follow-up activities that would facilitate broad and effective use of the human rights textbook for secondary schools discussed in Ambassador Heyken's report. We draw the Permanent Council's attention to the fact that Belarus has committed, under the 1989 Vienna Document, to "encourage in schools and other educational institutions consideration of the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Finally and most importantly, Belarus should immediately desist from abusing specious legalisms to shut down civil society organizations or their sub-elements. The United States requests that the OSCE Office in Minsk provide a fuller accounting of the organizations that have been liquidated in recent months as a result of the enforcement of so-called "housing" regulations and related re-registration requirements.

A recent example of an arbitrary legalism targeted at civil society is the presidential decree that allows state bodies unrestricted use of the terms "national" and "Belarusian" in their names, but restricts use of these words for entities not linked to the Government. As a result, four private newspapers now face the near hopeless task of re-registering under new names.

Once again, Mr. Chairman, we thank Ambassador Heyken for his service and wish him well in his future pursuits.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.